

# Tilly's Profitable Romance

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THIS is the story of a beautiful Redhead who has had a lifelong romance with a tomato. It brought her wealth, fame, and the presidency of an immensely successful business enterprise which she pulled up by its bootstraps to be the fifth largest vegetable cannery in the U. S.

It brought a new crop to America and seemingly permanent prosperity to the farmers of a California valley. It brought jobs to as many as 3,100 people during the cannery's peak season. It brought a testimonial dinner in her honor by her fellow citizens of Stockton, California; a resolution of acclaim by the California State Senate; and an insertion in the *Congressional Record* recognizing her achievements.

All this was accomplished from scratch by a petite, Titian-haired woman with a razor-sharp brain and the courage and determination to put it to work.

The story is a peculiarly American romance, because it probably could not have happened in any other country on the globe. It began in Brooklyn when 15-year-old Myrtle Ehrlich quit high school to go to work for a wholesale grocer. There she met the pomodoro — a pear-

shaped tomato imported from Italy. Many years and many obstacles later, it was to carry her to the presidency of Flotill Products, Inc., a concern whose 20 canned products are nationally known and ring up better than \$20 million a year in sales.

Tilly married her boss, the wholesale grocer, who was twice her tender age; but she didn't stay with either him or the grocery business very long. She got a divorce and became a "customers' woman" in Wall Street, where she acquired a keen understanding of finance.

That summer Tilly sailed for Naples, ostensibly on a vacation, but with definite plans for surveying the conditions which made Italy's climate so favorable for growing pomodoros. On board ship she met Florindo del Gaizo, the largest importer of Italian tomatoes to this country. Tilly immediately became thrilled and curious about del Gaizo's business and the profits he made by selling more than 700,000 cases of pomodoros in America every year.

Signor del Gaizo explained that the pomodoro grew magnificently around Naples, but nowhere else

in the world. He described it as strictly an Italian export which, because of its tartness, held up better in canning and cooking than the American variety.

"Maybe I'll grow it in America some day," Tilly proposed prophetically, but del Gaizo laughed.

TILLY returned from Italy and settled down to her broker's job without further plans for transplanting the tomato. Then, in 1934, Congress suddenly slapped a 50% tariff on pomodoro imports. Tilly got the news over her Wall Street ticker. It sounded like opportunity beckoning for a gal who already had plenty of business experience and enough vision to see profitable domestic production of pomodoros in her future.

The odds were stacked against the vegetable in this country. No one believed Italian tomatoes could be grown here. Scientists, chemists, farmers and tomato importers said they wanted no part in the plan. Tilly mustered up her ambition and pent-up energy to meet the challenge of these negative responses and came up with a formula: the right climate, some financial backing, and God's help would bring the pomodoro to America.

With plenty of determination, Tilly started looking for the right place to plant. She wanted a spot accessible to both rail and marine transportation and with a climate similar to that of Naples. She also

needed a canning factory nearby.

All these things she found around the dusty little cow town of Stockton, California. Undistinguished in every other way, Stockton offered a deep-water harbor, two major railroads, 287 days per year of active crop-growing weather; and numerous small, independent vegetable farmers. Stockton also had a small, inactive packing plant.

Tilly proceeded to promote the advantages of growing pomodoros to the farmers. They volunteered only shrugs. Even to try growing that freak, they told her, they wanted their money in advance. She went to del Gaizo and asked for some quick financing. Impressed with her missionary zeal, he advanced ten thousand dollars.

With only this small investment Tilly leased Stockton's cannery and bought enough pomodoro seeds for growing 200,000 boxes of tomatoes. She found three farmers who were willing to plant the Italian tomato, gave them seeds and promised to buy their crop. The farmers, however, were so hypnotized by their own predictions of failure that they did not live up to their contract and planted only enough for 700 boxes.

This heartbreaking setback would have discouraged a more seasoned packer, but it only spurred Tilly to higher goals. She was convinced the pomodoro would pay off if only she could give the growers enough incentive to interest them in steady

production. She knew a larger canning plant with a steady, year-around demand for pomodoros would provide that incentive. Tilly again took her plans to del Gaizo. Convinced she was no ordinary girl, del Gaizo invested an additional \$50,000 and sent over some packing machinery from his plant in Naples.

On November 13, 1935, Tilly's birthday, she opened her first plant in Stockton. She christened the business Flotill Products, Inc., a combination of her name and Florindo del Gaizo's. Commemorating the casual manner in which this unusual partnership was sealed, the Flotill crest bears the pictures of a champagne glass and a sprig of pomodoros.

AT LAST Tilly and the egg-shaped tomato were off to a fine start. But if Tilly knew tomatoes, she still had a lot to learn about canning machinery. Her ignorance almost proved fatal as her first crop went into the canning vats and pressure cookers. One of the largest cookers choked up and quit cold.

With the cooker out of action Flotill faced ruin. There was little hope for repairing it in time to save a whole crop of tomatoes from rotting. In despair Tilly drove out into the country for a good cry. Far off in the distance a locomotive wailed as if in sympathy. Its mournful cry gave her an idea and new hope.

Racing back to her Stockton plant, she telephoned the railroad. Tearfully, she explained the failure of the cookers. She had more than her own investment at stake, she argued. The future of her workers hung in the balance. Would the railroad help by constructing a temporary spur to her plant for a locomotive under a full head of steam? Piped into the cooker, the steam would save Flotill's crop.

Hungry for the new freight business Tilly might provide if she succeeded with her cannery, the railroad rushed the spur to completion and sent her the auxiliary steam plant.

That was 18 years ago, when San Joaquin County didn't even rate among the first 50 tomato-growing counties in the agricultural census. Today it leads the nation's tomato production, and Flotill Products ranks fifth among the canning concerns of the country. Last year it paid out more than \$4 million in wages and salaries and over \$7 million to hundreds of vegetable farmers, who affectionately call its president "Our Tilly."

Their affection and admiration is well deserved, for Tilly's success came almost single-handed. Two years after the start of Flotill, her good friend Florindo died. Tilly borrowed \$100,000 from a bank to buy out his share and his brother's. Flotill became all hers.

She launched an ambitious expansion program. A huge warehouse,

additional railroad spurs, and a chemical lab were built. Always on the lookout for more modern and rapid operation, Tilly designed and installed the first fruit-packing conveyor belt used in the San Joaquin Valley. Her design now is used by every major packer and canner in the valley.

Mechanical improvement was only part of her program. She hired a chemist and put him to work on research to cut down industrial waste. She added asparagus to her canning line (at the moment Flotill has 20 products and 79 different types, all nationally distributed) and started looking for a market for asparagus butts, up to then a by-product of asparagus canning customarily thrown out to rot.

With help from the Western Regional Research Laboratory in Albany, California, Tilly discovered that the asparagus pulp could be used for growing penicillin cultures and as fiber in cardboard production.

In the meantime she built a sister plant in Modesto, 30 miles away, and a second plant in Stockton. As the Flotill line expanded to include all vegetables and fruits, except citrus and pineapple, its volume climbed steadily to four million cans a year. Its facilities now permit Tilly to accept outside commissions, such as canning for other large concerns, or packaging 70,000 combat rations daily on special assignment for the Army.

Perhaps the best evidence of the prosperity Tilly brought to San Joaquin Valley is the increase in planted acreage since 1935. Before Tilly hit Stockton, 6,000 acres was the maximum planting. Now 17,000 acres is barely enough, even with tomato crops averaging seven tons to the acre.

TO THE newspapers Tilly is "Queen of the Pomodoro," but to personal friends who know her well she is a queen in other, more subtle, feminine ways. In her middle forties with pleasant curves she takes no trouble to conceal, she appears much taller in high heels than her five-foot-four. She pays meticulous attention to her clothes. They are simple, well cut and expensive.

Tilly wears no jewelry except a three-strand necklace of Oriental pearls which goes well with the cool grays and whites to which she is addicted. Her only other frivolities are a huge emerald-cut diamond guard ring and a watch set in baguette diamonds. She has never changed her hair-do since high school days—it is a simple, side-part page-boy with two small combs placed strategically over each temple.

The jewelry she does wear is so much a part of her uniform that she keeps it on even when peeling potatoes in her own kitchen. An exceptionally good cook, Tilly likes to entertain friends with informal

candlelight dinners which she prepares according to her own recipes. Her invitations are prized in Stockton because her guests know from experience that there's something special on the menu when Tilly entertains.

Possessed of an orderly brain and cool courage, Tilly on the job is not fazed by any problem. She works until each is solved to her satisfaction. Her unusual batting average might have made anyone else insufferably conceited, but she merely is sure of her worth. She will not tolerate interference, and no one dares to address her by her first name except the plant janitor, who barges into her office any time he feels like it to talk to her as if she were his own daughter. This sentimental streak disappears when she has to deal with anyone who tries to rule or dictate. Tilly does not blow up or lose her head. She smiles easily, even when discussing the thorniest management problem, but can beat the arguments of seasoned executives with her well-aimed sarcasm.

**T**ILLY's second marriage is typical of her entire success pattern — another crisis with a happy ending. In 1939, when the AFL Cannery Workers' Union called a wave of strikes in the West Coast canning industry, Tilly's plant was on its list. She appealed to Meyer Lewis, then western director of AFL, to help prevent a walkout and to

bargain for an amicable settlement. As he later related, he did not want to meet her. He expected to be faced with a dried-up prune "who had inherited a canning plant and did not know how to run it."

He came to visit and found a beautiful redhead, with appealing brown eyes, behind a huge mahogany desk. His tour of the plant showed how fairly and efficiently things were running. The employees had an incentive plan; steady raises; a nursery; and a housing development in the making. The strike threat quickly disappeared. Lewis liked the set-up so much that he accepted the job Tilly later offered him as plant manager. He worked at it for eight years, always admiring Tilly from a distance. In 1948 it got to be more than platonic admiration, and they were married.

At home Tilly is the relaxed, laughing, happy woman every husband likes around the house. She never plays boss and there is a deep mutual respect between her and Meyer. Knitting, collecting antiques and books, and seeing good plays are her interests outside the plant. She is a connoisseur of the Victorian period. But not all her pastimes are highbrow. She is not averse to betting a generous buck on the ponies — the only kind of risk that baffles her. The odds, she will tell you, are just too big.

Marriage by no means ended Tilly's business career. She and Meyer arrive at the plant together

at six. In separate offices they read the correspondence, dictate mail and supervise company activities. Tilly has no intention of deserting the business that put San Joaquin Valley on the map and rewarded her with more than a million dollars in less than 20 years.

A year or so ago she was chosen "Woman of the Year" in the poll of the Associated Press women's page editors, the first woman in the canning industry to be so honored.

The local citizenry not only is proud of her as a pioneer with the Italian tomato, but also sees her as an expression of an American

principle and a symbol of security; tagging on the heels of her personal success are jobs which valley families have come to depend on. It's little wonder then, that Stockton honored her with a testimonial dinner.

Afraid of the future? Fearful that that the frontiers of opportunity are closing in America for a gal who has the initiative to do a man's job and like it? Not Tilly. Here's her prediction for Flotill's prospects this year:

"God willing (her pet phrase), we should do better than \$25 million this year and we're planning for a definite increase in volume."



» We are not weak if we make a proper use of those means which the God of Nature has placed in our power . . . The battle, sir, is not to the strong alone; it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave.

— Patrick Henry

# THE SOVIET *fear* OF THE LAW

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BY JOHN LINEHAN

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ON JULY 8, 1952 the Iron Curtain was pulled down behind Dr. Walter Linse. Assaulted on his way to work at the Free Jurists' Committee headquarters in West Berlin, he was dragged into a stolen taxi which evaded pursuers and sped him into East Berlin. Communist papers boasting that "American agent" Linse had been silenced also crowed that "no war agent is safe whether he is in West Berlin, Paris, or Washington."

More recently, Dr. Linse, a German lawyer-economist, has been located and recognized in a Soviet Zone prison, held under a different name. His abductors have been identified as four ex-criminals released from Soviet Zone jails for agreeing to a Communist-paid kidnapping ring. Despite these known facts, protests made by German officials and by U. S. High Commissioner John McCloy and his successor, Walter Donnelly, have met with bland evasions from General Vasily Chuikov, the Soviet Control Commissioner, who has "never heard of the victim." On December 11, Mr. Donnelly sent a food package addressed to Dr. Linse

in care of Chuikov's office. The Christmas package was returned on December 13 stamped "Missing."

To the Investigating Committee of Free Jurists, a lawyers' organization for which Dr. Linse worked, his abduction was a tragic compliment and a reminder that its leader and founder, Dr. Theo Friedenau, is still at large and still hitting the Soviet system with what it fears the most — the law. His American war agency is a legal-aid society supported by private contributions and help from the West Berlin and West German governments, and founded to protect German victims from Soviet tyranny. The committee, collecting information about everything that happens in Eastern Germany, catalogues the injustices of Soviet Zone officials and sends them letters of warning which inhibit them from committing further acts that would be punished in a society more mindful of human rights.

Dr. Friedenau's basic idea is simple. This slim, dapper, forty-two-year-old lawyer believes that the Soviets want most to avoid advertisement of the fact that they must